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A Statewide Study of Transitions of Youth At Risk in Nontraditional Educational Programs in the U.S.

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Introduction:

This study describes key elements of adolescent transitions in 105 nontraditional schools, including those operated by state juvenile justice, mental health, and social service agencies.

Objectives:

The objective of this study was to describe transitions in 20,000 adolescents enrolled in state agency schools, 43% of whom had disabilities. A multi-faceted description of the conceptualization, strengths, and challenges of adolescent transitions in these unique schools was needed as a basis for the development of exemplary transition services by occupational therapists.

Methods:

Participants in the study included 25 youth and 105 program administrators. A mixed methods approach included: a) descriptive statistical analysis from on-line survey of all programs and b) grounded theory analysis of qualitative data from both students and program administrators, collected through focus groups, individual interviews, and document reviews. Trustworthiness was assured through triangulation of data sources and analysis methods, collaborative team analysis, and member checks.

Results:

The results of the study include a detailed statistical description of a system of fluid student transitions between typical high schools and state agency schools, as well as variations in student demographics across state agencies. The over-representation of African-American youth in state agencies schools by at least three times the state's population was of special concern. Themes emanating from the qualitative analysis included: positive and negative student characterizations, unplanned program entry, problems with student records, the critical importance of student/adult relationships, problematic collaborations between disciplines and programs, the negative cultures of receiving high schools, limited individualized transition planning, and transition programming currently in place, such as life skills, academics, and future planning for and by youth.

Conclusion:

In education programs for state agency youth, there is a gap between the ideal and the real in transition services. Subsequent to this study, collaborative research to develop five model programs for transition within state agency schools was begun.

Contribution to OT:

All youth deserve support to participate in meaningful occupation and become contributing members of society. Through service and research collaborations with state agencies, occupational therapists can play a central role in transitions for state agency youth, an historically overlooked population at risk.